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Leaks and Censors

Like every president before him, Ronald Reagan is frustrated by leaks and other disclosure of sensitive information. But unlike any president before him, Mr. Reagan has lost his sense of perspective about the problem. In an attempt to keep his secrets, the president has come up with some proposals that are out of keeping with the American tradition of the free flow of information about government between officials, ex-officials and the press and the general public.

One proposal requires all federal officials who have access to classified information to sign non-disclosure statements and agree to take lie detector tests if a superior has suspicions. Literally hundreds of thousands of federal employees would be covered by such an order, the most sweeping ever. Those who leaked, were caught and angered an administration could be fired or demoted.

This approach to government information ignores the real problem. There is too much classified information. Approximately 113,000 officials have the right to stamp material secret. They classified an estimated 21 million separate items last year. In the face of bureaucratic protectiveness run wild, government couldn't operate without disclosure of classified material, intentional and unintentional. And, of course, it is not all leaks that presidents and their chief aides object to. They do

it themselves and encourage subordinates to do it to get public opinion on their side of a debate. Any prosecution of leakers would be very, very selective and thus very, very unfair.

Yes, we said "prosecution." The administration also wants to make it a crime for any employee to disclose any classified data. This is a law that clearly is not needed. There are already criminal (and civil) remedies for the unauthorized disclosure of national security information.

But the Reagan administration's most far-reaching effort to censor public discussion of important government policies and issues is its effort to require all government officials who had access to highly classified information to sign non-disclosure statements that cover their post-government service. They must also agree to submit any post-government writing to government censors for prior approval — books, articles, speeches, lectures. If the letter of that were to apply, Ronald Reagan would have to submit his autobiography to his successor's censors for clearance!

Surely there is someone in the administration who knows better and can convince the president of the folly and danger of this. If the president won't change his mind, then Congress, which has just begun hearings on the Reagan regulations, will have to change it for him.